

Westword



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Muscling in on the action at Rude Rec Center.

BY ROBIN CHOTZINOFF
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photographs of Jack Warner by Gary Isaacs

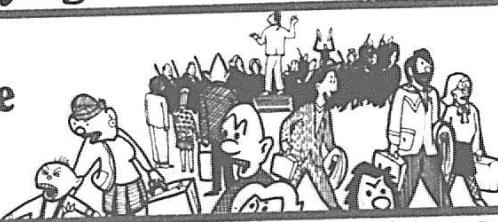
MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

Did the Emissaries of Divine Light take communal love too far?

BY MIKE O'KEEFFE
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SUNSET AT SUNRISE RANCH

There's a dark side to the Emissaries of Divine Light.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CURRY PARSONS

BY MIKE O'KEEFFE

At first glance, you'd be crazy if you didn't want to live at Sunrise Ranch.

The oldest and largest commune in Colorado feels more like a small college campus than any hippie-dippy Sixties experiment in collective living. Spread over almost 400 acres just west of Loveland, Sunrise Ranch radiates security, order and meditative reflection. There's a warm appeal to the place even in the dead of winter.

The gleaming domed chapel, the ranch's spiritual center, sits alone on a hill. The visitor reception center, which also serves as a cafeteria for the residents and their many guests, is large and inviting.

A large pool covered with a plastic bubble gets year-round use. The tennis courts, like the rest of the grounds, are litter-free and well-maintained. Cattle, horses and sheep meander around the fields, while land for organic farming lies fallow, waiting to be plowed and seeded in the spring.

The 147 people who live at the ranch are just as nice. Everybody smiles and says hello as they pass each other on the narrow asphalt paths. They're mostly baby-boomers, but Sunrise residents include toddlers and senior

citizens, too. Even the oldest are trim and rosy-cheeked, and they all appear content and well-adjusted.

And why shouldn't they? They are, after all, the cream of the crop of the Emissaries of Divine Light, a plain-living but well-heeled spiritual community that calls Sunrise Ranch its international headquarters. Many want to live at Sunrise, but few are chosen. It's considered a great honor to live at the ranch.

The Emissaries of Divine Light believe good thoughts and deeds produce a good world, while negative ones create hell on Earth. Thanks to mankind's penchant for living out of

When they asked questions or showed signs of intellectual independence, they were labeled spiritually retarded.

tune with divine strategy, there's more than enough hell to go around. Guilt, trauma and other psychological baggage passed down from generation to generation has made the world a very unpleasant place, say the Emissaries.

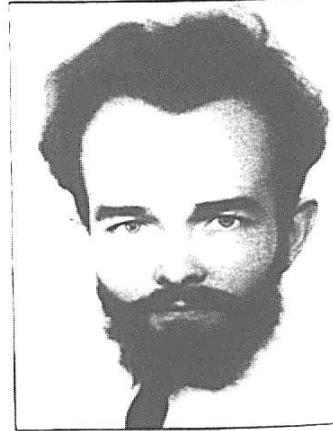
Changing one's behavior to help bring order to a chaotic world is a very appealing notion. EDL estimates it may have as many as 7,000 followers worldwide who regularly attend its services and seminars; thousands more are peripherally associated with the

organization. You won't find them in airports selling flowers, on television praying for donations, or at your door handing out literature—the Emissaries eschew that sort of proselytizing for a much more subtle approach. New members usually come into the fold through friends or after attending low-key EDL lectures.

But the Emissaries of Divine Light have a dark side as well, one not evident in the videotapes, pamphlets and books published at Sunrise Ranch. Former members say EDL wasn't honest with them. When they asked questions or showed signs of intellectual independence, they were labeled spiritually retarded. These critics note that Emissaries become emotionally and economically dependent on the community and find it hard to break away; even after they leave, many require counseling to regain their psychological strength.

"It's like being a rape victim," says John, a former Emissary who asked his real name not be used. "You've lost years of your life. You're ashamed for having been fooled, and thinking about it, going over it in your head, is very unpleasant."

The Emissaries of Divine Light messed with their minds, ex-adherents say. "It's a co-dependent system that facilitates a lot of denial and dysfunction," says another former Emissary.



Let there be light: Lloyd Meeker founded the Emissaries of Divine Light.

"They're what I would call a destructive cult," says Nancy, a former Emissary now with the Cult Awareness Network of the Rocky Mountains, the regional chapter of a national group that provides support to former cult members and the families and friends of current members.

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EDL has had to weather such charges through the years, notes EDL education director Alan Hammond. "Time has proven [the EDL philosophy] is wholesome," he says.

Then again, maybe the story behind the Emissaries of Divine Light can't be painted in black and white. An Emissary associate for over a decade says EDL is a mixture of "incredible free thinkers" and people smothered emotionally and spiritually by the organization's structure and teachings. The Emissaries can offer a lot to people who are psychologically strong, she says, but not much to those who need extra support or time to mature. With the Emissaries, you either sink or swim.

And sometimes when Emissaries sink, they take others down with them. In January, Ray Mickelie, a former ranch resident and longtime Emissary, confessed to Loveland police that he had sexually assaulted children over a ten-year period. Several ex-Emissaries place part of the blame on EDL's emphasis on the purity of creative acts. Says John, the former follower, "There's no question in my mind he used Emissary teachings to provide a justification mechanism."

OUTSIDERS WHO TRY to get a handle on the Emissaries of Divine Light might find it easier to nail Jell-O to the wall.

The Emissaries' leader, Bishop Michael Exeter, a descendant of British gentry, is a trim, graying man in his mid-fifties who looks much younger. He's also a man badly in need of a Toastmasters course. Exeter speaks slowly, in vague terms, without passion or charisma.

In fact, so do many other Emissaries. While few share Exeter's extreme blandness, many speak in confusing metaphysical terms. They're patient with outsiders—and admit their reluctance to reduce EDL philosophy to simplistic dogma—but trying to grasp their approach to life can be exhausting.

Emissary critics say that's no accident. Wisconsin psychologist Ed Morse, who treats former cult members, says EDL's bland approach may be a form of mind conditioning—members learn to tune themselves out of dull meetings and lose contact with reality. It's a "methodical but subtle" form of mind manipulation, he says.

"You can bore someone into a trance," agrees Steve Hassan, a Boston therapist who also counsels former cult members.

The Emissaries' history is less ethereal than their language. The group was founded more than fifty years ago by Lloyd Meeker, an Iowa-born preacher's son who as a youth moved to Colorado's Western Slope. An early photograph of Meeker—dressed in a white suit, with a full beard and intense, searing eyes—is disarming. In later photos, beardless and hair slicked back, he resembles a Midwestern Clark Gable.

He left home at sixteen and for ten years worked numerous jobs. After losing his construction company in the stock market crash of 1929, he rode the rails in search of a spiritual path to salvation. Meeker was working as a salesman when God apparently answered his questions. Taking the name Uranda, he founded The Church of the Emissaries of Divine Light in September 1932.

Uranda's small following received a major boost in 1940, when the spiritual leader was introduced to English nobleman Martin Cecil, the seventh Marquess of Exeter, by Conrad O'Brien French, touted by EDL as the model for Ian Fleming's James Bond. An accomplished artist, O'Brien French later became an Emissary and lived at Sunrise Ranch until his death a few years ago. Cecil, too, soon joined the spiritual community, contributing not only an inquiring mind but also his family's resources. Cecil's 15,000-acre ranch in British Columbia, known as

"It was an accident," jokes David Gray of his first encounter with Sunrise Ranch. A college buddy getting married at the ranch had asked Gray to be his best man, when Gray arrived for the wedding, he liked what he found so much that he's stuck around for twenty years. "I was amazed at the way people accepted me. I wasn't looking for anything... but the people were genuine and they cared about me as an individual."

As EDL grew, so did its holdings. A relatively small, scattered organization, its properties are impressive. In addition to Sunrise Ranch and 100-Mile House, the Emissaries operate ten large communities around the world, and a smaller ones. Their Glen Ivy center, a hot springs resort in California, would make Club Med drool. About ten years ago they purchased almost an entire village in England, including manor house, hotel and grocery store.

The Emissaries finance their expansions with profits earned from EDL-affiliated businesses. 100-Mile House, for example, includes a bakery, newspaper, inn, real estate company, bar, golf course and electronics store. Hammond says the cash flow is supplemented with donations, book sales and charges paid by visitors who stay at EDL properties.

At Sunrise Ranch, Emissaries bale hay, tend to the cattle, harvest the crops, prepare the meals and perform other jobs for room and board and a small monthly stipend. Labor costs are low compared to similar non-religious operations. (Hammond won't say how much members receive each month, but does confirm that it's more than \$100.) Former Sunrise residents complain that the small allowance keeps Emissaries locked to the ranch. It takes months to save just enough money to buy an airline ticket to visit family and friends, a car or other personal items. "You become a slave," says Renee, a former Emissary who left the group

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"It's not just a religious belief you can plug into once a week. It's a lifestyle belief."

100-Mile House, became one of EDL's first centers. Emissaries and their businesses soon dominated the small town nearby, provoking hard feelings from their neighbors.

In 1945 Uranda decided to establish EDL's international headquarters in Colorado. The farmland he purchased near Loveland was poor—a condition he blamed on spiritual rather than agricultural failings. The Emissaries turned it into a model working ranch. They used organic farming methods that at the time, when most Americans were bent on better living through chemistry, were considered weird. "Things are coming around full cycle," says EDL's Nick Giglio, who oversees the ranch's activities. "Our focus is stewardship of the Earth... It's just the natural way of doing things."

In 1954 Uranda, an avid pilot, died in a plane crash. Because EDL teaches that nothing occurs by accident, many blamed their lack of faith for his death. Martin Cecil, who adopted Exeter as his surname, took the helm.

The organization's greatest growth occurred in the late Sixties and early Seventies, when many young people disillusioned with mainstream religion were attracted to the Emissaries' mixture of new-age mysticism and Christian terminology.



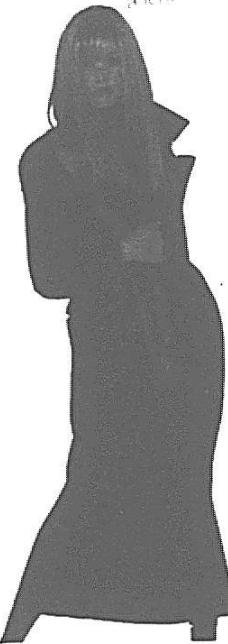
Let us pray: Emissaries education director Alan Hammond and his wife, Jean, in the commune's meditation room.

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SUNRISE

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after eight years. "You work all day for nothing, because you're made to feel like you're sacrificing for God." To use an Emissary vehicle to drive a few miles into Loveland, EDL charged \$10; to borrow the car for a trip to Denver cost \$30, Renee says.

Hammond paints a different picture of life back at the ranch. "I'm not sure how many citizens have housing, food, medicine, vitamins and supplementary income provided," he notes. "Most people don't live as well as the people at Sunrise Ranch." While stipends may have been meager a few years ago, he says, that's because the organization wasn't as affluent as it is now.

Most Emissaries don't live at the organization's communal centers, many are professionals who earn comfortable salaries and contribute to EDL's operations. Some Emissaries who live communally operate independent businesses. Gray, for example, owns a landscaping company in Louisville, but prefers living at Sunrise Ranch. "It's not just a religious belief you can plug into once a week," he says. "It's a lifestyle belief."

"I find myself here because it's purposeful," says Lou Rotola, the avuncular EDL Rocky Mountain coordinator who speaks with a thick Brooklyn accent. "Sunrise is the spiritual base that strikes a chord [of life throughout the world]."

Martin Exeter's death in 1988 was a shock to his followers. Many wondered how a man with such spiritual enlightenment could have been merely mortal. "You almost felt these guys were immune to death," explains David, another former Emissary who lives in Wisconsin.

Exeter's son Michael, who married Uranda's eldest daughter Nancy, has been in charge since. Former Emissaries complain there was no discussion from the rank and file about who should lead EDL. "It's an autocracy," charges David, who left the Emissaries in 1988 following an eight-year hitch. Then again, he admits, nobody expected anyone but Michael would take over. Like the gentry of England from whom he was descended, Michael Exeter was born to fill his old man's shoes.

YOU WON'T FIND ANY WHINERS at Sunrise Ranch, followers are content to sleep in the beds they've made. "It negates being a victim of circumstances," says Giglio.

EDL's basic message is that all individuals are responsible for the quality of their lives. If they act and think in a negative way, the results will be negative; if they act and think in a creative, positive manner, positive things will happen. "We encourage people to contribute something creative to each moment," says Hammond.

Through good thoughts and good deeds, EDL teaches, paradise on Earth becomes possible. By bringing a pure, creative spirit to every second—be it negotiating a business deal, having sex or vacuuming a rug—goodness will radiate throughout the world.

The Emissaries believe in spiritual resonance, such a powerful concept that it can be used to cure diseases from cancer to arthritis. Disease, which they say is spawned by resentment, hatred, jealousy and other negative emotions, can be healed through the energy transfer process of "attunement." EDL

healers don't touch their patients, but instead hold their hands over them. "There is a central resonating factor in all people," explains Rotola, "and I express myself as I am and it resonates in other people."

Critics point out the danger when the seriously ill are treated with attunement rather than medicine. John recalls one Emissary who came down with pneumonia; attunement didn't make him better, and his condition deteriorated seriously until someone finally convinced EDL authorities to take him to a doctor. "Nobody has ever died through medical neglect," counters Hammond, who adds that doctors and dentists regularly visit Sunrise Ranch. "Health is a very important factor in our living."

Sex, too, can be a powerful tool to spread good in the world. The Emissaries say divine energy can be passed from God through men, and then to women, where it is reflected back to God. It's a belief that's earned them a "free love cult" label from outsiders, although Hammond says EDL advocates only responsible initiation of sexual relations.

However, former female Emissaries accuse the group of playing sexual power politics. "As long as a man is in a higher spiritual position than a woman, regardless if he is married, he can have sex with her," explains Renee. That kind of system pits women against each

"As long as a man is in a higher spiritual position than a woman, regardless if he is married, he can have sex with her."

other, frustrates their attempts to establish clearly defined relationships with men and destroys their self-esteem. "It's set up to promote spirituality, but it ends up justifying for men their desire to have sex with whomever they want to."

Emissaries insist that sexual relations at Sunrise Ranch transcend such pettiness. "We believe in doing the noble and honorable in all things, and particularly in sex, which is such a core area of living," says Hammond.

The Emissaries of Divine Light do not consider themselves Christian, they don't like to call their philosophy a religion, either. (They do, however, view Jesus Christ as "the perfect expression of God on Earth," according to Hammond.) They say their beliefs give them a sense of purpose in a world that has lost its humanity. "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to tell the world condition is intensifying," observes Gray. "Technology is becoming more and more important, but it...can't provide us with the right answers."

For some followers, neither does EDL. Several former believers say the group is a dangerous cult that uses the labors and donations of its members to keep its leaders comfortable.

"The cost to somebody who pursues their program is high," charges John. You give up your career and educational aspirations, you give up your ability to make your own decisions. They're essentially a little fiefdom whose main purpose is the comfort and self-aggrandizement of a small elite."

Besides keeping them poor, former members claim, EDL leaders use brainwashing and peer pressure to hold the group together. "They took control

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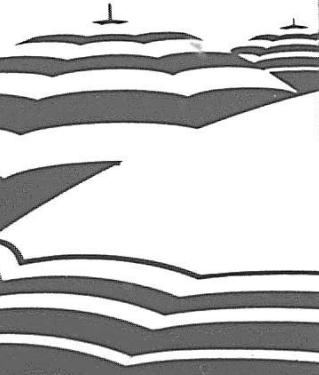
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it you let them," explains Renee. "And they always tried to gain control."

Therapist Hassan, a former high-ranking Unification Church official who is now a cult expert, says the group fits his definition of a destructive cult. Like the Moonies and the Hare Krishnas, EDL controls members' access to information about the group and manipulates their emotions through mind control techniques, he says. It presents a different picture of the organization to outsiders than to members, claiming to be enlightened in ways outsiders wouldn't understand.

Several former Emissaries say they attended their first EDL gathering not because they were interested in the group's philosophy—if that was even advertised as the focus—but because the meetings were presented as seminars on organic farming or other alternative issues. David attended a lecture in Madison, Wisconsin, by Emissary George Emery that focused on "holistic living."

"He was a salesman, and a very good one," says David. The Emissary invited him to an upcoming week long seminar in Indiana, telling him he was lucky to get a spot—they'd just had a cancellation. "I jumped in with both feet first," he says. The EDL belief system was not presented to him up front, he says; it took years of progressively

longer and intensive classes for him to get the complete picture.

Hammond denies that the group tries to keep people in the dark over a long period of time. "We're endeavoring to help them find themselves as soon as possible," he says. "That's the whole point." EDL's recommendation that followers attend just one theory class a year, he notes, simply reflects its emphasis on learning through practical experience.

Ex-Emissaries recall being overwhelmed and uncritically accepted when they joined the group; a tactic experts say is typical. "I call it 'love bombing,'" says Nancy of the Cult Awareness Network. "Most who get involved are not looking for anything, but they're caught in a moment of transition—first going to college,

traveling, going through the break-up of a relationship—and they're not thinking critically."

Hassan agrees. "You're susceptible to someone who's flattering you and giving you a vision of the future that's attractive and empowering," he says.

EDL'S RELENTLESS EMPHASIS ON THE positive destroyed their capacity to think independently, former members say. "If you ask questions, that means you're not spiritually attuned, and if you don't ask questions, you're more accepted within the group," says Nancy.

"They want everyone to be in total agreement," explains David. "But when you do that, there's no room for critique. There's no internal control within the organization and any secret can be protected. There's a tremendous amount of peer pressure to conform, and when you don't see anybody else who is critical, you stick out like a sore thumb. So you surrender the critical thinking capacity."

Hammond argues that most critique still involves tearing down other people and other things, and EDL considers that destructive. "We are interested in hearing differing views," he says, "but they are presented in a creative spirit."

Denying the negative side of the psyche forces people to sacrifice part of

"I've never seen anyone forced to do anything, and they've never asked me for money."

their identity, says Hassan. Negative emotions—depression, loneliness, anxiety—are not fun, but they are part of the human experience.

Critics say EDL's focus on the positive may have given confessed child molester Mickellic a way to rationalize his crimes. Loveland police say Mickellic's abusive relationship with several kids began when the children were seven or eight years old and continued for about ten years. During that time, he may have had hundreds of sexual contacts with them.

Loveland Detective Mark Stone says he doesn't believe Emissary teachings created a climate conducive to Mickellic's alleged crimes, but former Emissaries say he doesn't understand the way EDL operates. They point out that Mickellic told police he was providing the kids with a service, and that ties in with the Emissaries' belief that their activities benefit mankind in a pure, creative manner. "Part of being a good Emissary is to serve," says a former adherent who recently parted with EDL. "That's part of their language."

"Ray Mickellic found justification for what he did from the Emissaries," Renee charges.

Other former adherents say Mickellic may have thought he was part of a chosen group of people who can do no wrong. "It may weaken a natural human system of checks and balances," says Hassan of that belief, "a system that keeps deviant behavior in check."

EDL officials say Mickellic was not deeply involved at Sunrise Ranch, although many Emissaries know him, at least on a casual basis. Mickellic, a graphic artist, was hired by the ranch to produce its calendar and was involved in other Sunrise business transactions. "Everybody acts like they didn't know Ray, but Ray was part of EDL for years," says one ex-follower.

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"Let me say unequivocally that Ray never picked up anything at Emissary meetings that could justify what he's accused of," Hammond insists.

Others, too, are less willing to paint EDL as a cult, or pin Mickelie's behavior on the Emissaries. "You have deviants in any group," explains Rob Tucker of the Toronto-based Council on Mind Abuse. A decade ago, Tucker says, COMA received many calls about the Emissaries from worried parents and at one time was quite critical of EDL, but he feels ambivalent about the group today. "I can't come to any firm conclusions," he says. "A lot of these groups use techniques to systematically draw you into the social structure, but we don't have any evidence that's the case with the Emissaries. Maybe they've cooled down their program and made it fairer."

EDL may well be working to improve its program. "The man running the show now is more concerned about the affects of people's actions on each other than his father," says Renee, referring to Michael Exeter. Other observers, too, say the group is striving to make internal changes.

"There are philosophical inaccuracies upon which the Emissaries are based that are defended by some of the old guard, but there are people there who want to make changes," says Gail Melnick, who briefly explored Emissary life a few years ago. Although it wasn't for her, she counts many Emissaries as good friends.

"They're an uncommonly fine group of people... wonderful, honest and bright. That speaks highly of the Emissaries," she says. "I've never seen anyone forced to do anything, and they've never asked me for money."

Emissary faithful say former followers are blaming a worthwhile philosophy and organization for their own failings. The Emissaries try to help floundering members, Hammond explains, but their efforts don't always work. Those who leave dissatisfied sometimes want to pin their bad feelings on the Emissaries. "We endeavor to provide a nurturing atmosphere for everyone," he says. "The people who criticize the Emissaries may be projecting their own unhappiness."

But Hassan explains that it is typical of cults to discredit the criticisms of former members by saying their unhappiness with the organization stems from their own shortcomings. "Mind control cults don't want people to grow up," he says. "They don't want people to think for themselves." □



photograph by Gary Isaacs

A communal walk on the mild side.

S.A.V.E.S.

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| ▼ Rotel RT850 | Digital AM/FM Quartz Tuning | 229.00 |
| ▼ Luxman T111 | Digital Synthesis Tuner | 219.00 |

TUNER PRE-AMP

| | | |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---------|
| ▼ Luxman TP-117 | Dual-Zone Pre-Amp with Tuner | 1050.00 |
| ▼ Rotel RTC-850 | Remote Control Tuner/Pre Amp | 479.00 |

SPEAKERS

| | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|--------|
| ▼ Boston T-1000 | 3 way Dual 8" Tower Speaker | 449.00 |
| ▼ Boston T-930 | 3 way 10" Tower Speaker | 269.00 |
| ▼ Boston T-830 | 3 way 8" Tower Speaker | 219.00 |
| ▼ Boston A-60 | 2 way 8" Bookshelf Speaker | 109.00 |
| ▼ Boston A-40 | 2 way 5 1/4" Bookshelf Speaker | 79.00 |
| ▼ Boston Sub Six | 3 Piece Satellite/Subwoofer | 489.00 |
| ▼ Rogers LS-4A | Monitor Loudspeaker | 249.00 |
| ▼ Rogers LS6A | Bi-Wireable Monitor Loudspeaker | 299.00 |
| ▼ Rogers Studio 1A | BiWireable Studio Monitor | 529.00 |

SUB WOOFERS

| | | |
|----------------|-------------------|---------|
| ▼ Boston SW-10 | Power Subwoofer | 519.00 |
| ▼ Entec LF-10 | Powered Subwoofer | 1995.00 |
| ▼ Entec LFX | Powered Subwoofer | 1079.00 |

SIGNAL PROCESSING

| | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------|
| ▼ Wadia Digital 1000-64 | Signal Processor | 3900.00 |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------|

*Some items demos
Some one of a kind
Full warranties

* Also big savings on all Yamaha components.

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Soundings